and of little practical use to the community with the exception, perhaps, of a little information on health. No basic agriculture, animal husbandry or home economics, for instance, are included. Education without these dimensions will be a waste of time, energy and resources, both human and material. A few agencies are addressing the task of improving textbooks, but more effort would be richly rewarded. Teaching techniques perpetuate and reward mechanical memorisation. Learning for most children begins with the memorisation of Koranic texts from which no deviation can be tolerated. Consequently, perfect repetitions reap rewards, while independent thinking and imaginative interpretation are belittled.

The development of human resources is another critical area. The quality of teachers in the refugee villages is notoriously low; most are no more than tenth grade graduates; many are chosen by political bosses and camp leaders for reasons completely unconnected with pedagogical talent. Even the credentials of many staff members at the fledgling Muslim Women's University are below par. Yet, despite ludicrously low salaries, shortages of textbooks and laboratory facilities, the 20 professors labour untiringly to provide the 200-strong student body with some basics as best they can. This is the only Afghan institution of its kind in Pakistan and the steadily increasing enrolment, in spite of all the inadequacies, speaks eloquently of the need.

A good part of the problem lies in the fact that most qualified teachers left for resettlement abroad as soon as they possibly could. This has created the same shrinking of the human resource base in education already noted among health workers. Some teachers were hounded from their jobs, while others have simply forgotten their skills and given up interest in teaching. The lure of resettlement in countries offering greater freedom and opportunities for women also contributes to a high attrition rate among teenage students. Although enrolment at the six schools offering studies beyond the primary level is approaching 1,000, an estimated 60 per cent of the girls will leave before graduating. This further narrows the professional base in the education sector.

The training of teachers and teacher trainers, together with the production of teaching materials to upgrade teacher levels and improve classroom methods, have therefore become urgent priorities. This is recognised by upwards of 25 Afghan and international agencies and institutions working in this field.

No doubt the affluent strata in major urban centres will succeed in returning education to a workable level fairly quickly, as displaced women teachers, and even a small number of those resettled abroad, will probably return to the cities where pre-war structures and facilities continue to function. To broaden the system it would be most beneficial to attract to the teaching profession those women from less privileged groups who expect to return to live in the poorer sections of Kabul or in the satellite villages around all the urban centres. The recruitment of women from provincial capitals, and women with town/village links might also yield excellent results. Furthermore, to be really effective, curricula and teaching materials should ideally reflect these various backgrounds as well as focus on the requirements of pre-pubescent girls in general, so as to create a broader foundation for future development activities.

There also exists a very real opportunity for the introduction of early childhood education programmes, a new concept which has much to recommend to a society that is so clearly mother-child oriented. Afghan children have been emotionally battered by experiences of war and continue to be affected by the insecurity of uncertain exile. Polarised and insulated by the fears and prejudices of their parents, small children have few opportunities to interact with others outside closely-knit family and neighbourhood circles. Constructive child-to-child play and learning activities which form the core of early childhood

education programmes build self-confidence and emotional security. Most importantly, by giving very young Afghan children the chance to broaden their knowledge about one another, Afghan society may take an important step toward re-establishing tolerance and a sense of national unity. Although it may be too late for many adults, this is an opportunity which should be seized on behalf of the young.

The experiences of the one programme focusing on early childhood education in Pakistan have been very promising and indicate possible approaches for development. These would include, in addition to curriculum enrichment, the design, production and wider distribution of a variety of resource materials for the very young which were unknown in pre-war Afghanistan.

The demand for English courses overwhelms the capacity of existing programmes, despite the fact that English language is now included in the curricula of three of the high schools. Over 500 girls enrol in special English courses each year while an almost equal number languish on waiting lists. A sizeable number pay privately for courses run by Pakistanis, and all those attending Pakistani schools receive various levels of English instruction. This clamour for English relates directly to the requirements of those seeking resettlement and employment in Pakistan. Not surprisingly, this has led to the development of companion courses in public administration and business management, including typing and computer skills. Again, applicants outnumber places, by about four to one.

This surge of enthusiasm is welcome as it indicates a loosening of those attitudes which have held women back for so many years. Though still beset with major limitations, the varied activities now available for women in the educational sector are nothing short of breathtaking considering their doleful beginnings. Undeniably many problems still exist, but the fact that most are recognised, means that improvements should be possible; a growing number of agencies are now channelling their efforts in this direction.

Women in the workplace

After years of enforced inactivity, women have begun to stir in perceptible numbers. Predictably, they first entered the refugee workforce in the traditionally acceptable areas of medicine and education. Over the years they have moved into fields such as social work and office administration. There are even a few agriculturalists and engineers among the estimated 800 women currently in work. There are hundreds more on the files of employment agencies, who lack the qualifications required by the institutions seeking Afghan women employees.

This reflects changing attitudes influenced by stark economic reality. Not long after the emergency phase ended for the refugees and the care-and-maintenance infrastructure took over, concerns over 'dependency' surfaced. The need to submit to regulations imposed by outsiders and to accept services from foreigners in order to eke out an uncertain existence was a galling experience for most Afghans, men and women alike, for it reduced the self-reliance in which they have always taken pride. Furthermore, the erosion of a man's ability to provide for his family struck deeply into the concept of male honour. Consequently, many male heads of families modified their ideas of respectable occupations and turned to a multiplicity of endeavours, including trade and service which had previously been regarded with disdain. Women made similar adjustments, as many came face to face with the painful reality of suddenly becoming the principal wage earners of their families. Employment for wages

acquired an aura of respectability and is even regarded by some as an honourable contribution to the *jihad* effort.

A number of embroidery projects established for income generation among rural refugee populations use the traditional artistry of women from many areas, but design and marketing remain predominantly regulated by foreigners. This, together with the fact that before the exodus women's handiwork was rarely offered for sale, suggests that the long-term viability of such projects after repatriation is highly debatable. Women typically sewed, embroidered, beaded and wove to complete bridal trousseaux. To sell handmade items was a matter of shame, as much for male family providers as for the women themselves.

Economic distress and boredom among refugee women has changed this attitude to some extent. It is estimated that three times as many men as women have lost their lives during the war; some reports predict that after repatriation, adult females will outnumber adult males by as many as five to three. Large numbers of rural women will therefore be alone, and many will be primary providers for their children and disabled family members. Afghan society will not abandon these women to destitution, but unless they are given the means to contribute economically to the extended families who give them shelter, they may well find themselves relegated to the status of servants and their children deprived of even basic development opportunities. It is also entirely possible that the extraordinary number of single women with their children will so burden the traditional support system that it will fail, leaving women without any protective networks and the society in chaos.

It is therefore essential that every aid sector should include women and children, keeping in mind the traditional compatibility of male/female roles in the rural areas. New programmes can then enhance women's activities instead of dichotomising gender roles and thereby diminishing the status of women by widening the gap between the sexes. Current trends promote male-focused reconstruction projects almost exclusively and few attempts are being made to gauge their potential impact on traditional women's activities. There are, however, an almost endless number of avenues to explore which would be conducive to the enhancement of women's activities. Food processing, veterinary services and small home-based businesses only begin the list of possibilities. The introduction of appropriate technologies in these fields is clearly indicated. Some means of providing women with access to credit facilities free from interest and collateral commitment, with easy repayment instalments, will also be needed. Rural women the world over have proved themselves more reliable than men in the repayment of loans and there seems no reason why Afghan women should be an exception. The present tendency to scoff at such suggestions paralyses innovative programming.

Within the urban refugee populations, different problems will require different solutions. In the past, large numbers of urban middle-class women actively resisted, and even rejected, calls for a role for women in the public sphere. Traditional, protected roles provided women with many rewards, not the least of which was security. Independent positions, on the other hand, seemed fraught with insecurity, particularly since many of the advantages lacked religious and cultural sanction. Furthermore, even though education and the right to work were legally recognised, access to the legal system itself was difficult, if not impossible.

Women acquired self-esteem primarily through their own female networks forged by links with kin, place of origin, client/patron relationships and religious community organisations. Most importantly, through maintaining family solidarity, arranging marriages, mediating personal and family disputes, supplying healing and economic support, organising religious gatherings and

providing communication links throughout their networks, women exerted considerable influence within the home and the community.

Although these networks have been damaged by the experience of exile, most women will undoubtedly repair them once repatriation takes place.

Nevertheless, there is still a danger that some women will have been so cast adrift that they will find it impossible to renew their associations. If they are not to go unnoticed and untended, community services cutting across class and network lines will be necessary. It is with this in mind that the current surge in enthusiasm for training in the delivery of community services might be encouraged. This would be especially relevant for programmes targeting vulnerable, disabled and lower income women in the smaller towns and cities.

Although focusing on health, education and child care would seem most appropriate and least likely to arouse opposition, integrated economic enterprises capitalising on the current acceptance of female earnings should not be overlooked. Small businesses catering to the community and not dependent on outside markets could include knitting, tailoring, food processing and even toy making to supply early childhood education centres. Again, as in the rural areas, easy credit would be an essential element if programmes are to be truly community-oriented. Women's banks which have recently proved so successful in a number of Muslim countries, including Pakistan, provide ready models. Such a strategy also requires the participation of professionals, a small and distinct segment of the women's urban populations.

Although statistics indicate that by 1978, women were joining the workforce in increasing numbers, only about eight per cent of women were actually receiving an income. Most of these lived in urban centres and the majority was composed of professionals, technicians and administrators employed by the government. A smaller number of women were found among industrial administrators and producers, particularly in food processing, textiles, pharmaceuticals and ceramics. A few were self-employed. Even those women who pursued public careers in government and business were bound by family strictures. A girl sought education and prepared for a career only with the consent of male family members. Furthermore, even where they were encouraged to pursue careers, working women were expected to socialise within the family and were allowed few social interactions with their colleagues at the workplace.

The problem for many women now living in exile in Pakistan is that they find themselves enmeshed in a new set of restrictions, while former attitudes still remain solidly entrenched in many families. The challenge is to offset these attitudes by developing an active pool of professionals through training and work experience. While providing technical and office skills is essential, the ultimate aim of any project should be to prepare women to participate in programme design and to assume decision making and management responsibilities so that they may set their own priorities.

Few Afghan women among the refugees have had the opportunity to acquire these sorts of skills, yet their introduction may well prove to be among the more important contributions that can be made. A forum held in 1989 in Peshawar, Pakistan, brought together over 100 Afghan working women representing the entire spectrum of political ideology. Although the women were articulate in identifying problems, they were completely unable to suggest practical approaches, much less workable implementation strategies. The needs in this field are great.

Some strategies for action

The concepts advanced through the currently fashionable 'Women in Development' theories have much to offer those concerned with programmes for Afghan women. Rhetoric abounds in Pakistan: unfortunately much of it seems empty.

Since many donor directives now stipulate that programmes must target women, implementing bodies have been quick to commit themselves to action without fully understanding the long-term direction their efforts should take. This is a pity because, as these discussions show, there is much to do and models and resources do exist. There are upwards of 80 agencies and institutions currently involved with women's projects in Pakistan, yet one constantly hears lamentations bemoaning the lack of attention to women. Does this mean these projects are ineffective and unworthy of notice? Or is it simply a woeful breakdown in communication?

Probably the latter. Rather than continually attempting to reinvent the wheel through new projects, more effort could be made to study ongoing projects so as to learn from past mistakes and build on foundations already in place. A research clearing house might be useful if implementing bodies would be more conscientious in contacting one another. Somehow, it seems that day-to-day details of individual projects are allowed to consume time so completely that workers, apparently unaware that other projects exist, miss valuable opportunities for information sharing.

Also regrettable is the inordinate emphasis placed on the quantity of beneficiaries and services. Impressive figures may enhance final reports, but fewer well-trained professional women with experience in providing well-managed, effective services will reap far higher dividends through their ability to design and manage realistic programmes after repatriation. Much can be accomplished when women are given opportunities to achieve an acknowledged status, but they can only speak with authority after they have acquired sound technical knowledge. So quality training in all fields is a major priority.

What areas are appropriate for women? The answer is that all fields can be addressed without transgressing accepted traditional activities. The present tendency is to relegate women's programmes to a separate, isolated existence apart from, and on the periphery of, overall development. This is an unfortunate fallacy which can only lead to failure. Men and women live together. What one group does affects the other. Therefore, integrated programming is the key.

To accomplish this, a better understanding of what women do is imperative. Time use studies for women incorporated into project research would produce data highlighting the interrelation of traditional male-female roles and indicate areas where integrated programming might be most productive. Such studies might deter implementers from attempting to introduce programmes which are patently incompatible with the lifestyles of selected female targets; they would also guard against possible negative impacts from new male-focused projects on activities from which women currently derive status and satisfaction.

For example, if women in certain areas must spend 70 per cent of their time collecting water and fuel, introducing education and income-generating projects would be wasted effort. However, if a potable water system is included in a project to be carried out by men, then choosing the position of water terminals according to the preference of women would not only further the adoption of better hygiene practices, but would free some time for the women to spend on those other projects.

Not all groups expend time in similar ways, a factor which necessarily requires programme designs to be flexible enough to accommodate Afghanistan's geographic and ethnic complexities. One blueprint will not be sufficient. While maintaining regional flexibility, sectoral integration must be attained. While pursuing these goals, every project planner should be trained to ask two questions: how are women involved in this sector? and how will this project affect women? Recent agency reports from Afghanistan highlight the ignorance that impedes plans for women. Health surveys of various sorts, for instance, inevitably include the caveat that the conclusions may not be valid because access to women, the primary custodians of family health, was unattainable.

Perhaps it is time to try to design a visual questionnaire for non-literates. Elderly women receiving concise instruction from male health workers could then easily gather the information. Although no doubt far from ideal, such efforts would at least provide a glimmer of understanding into what is at present a dark void.

This points to the matter of teaching aids in general, another priority with enormous untapped potential, although laudable efforts have been made, particularly within the health sector. Most recently a new dimension using the principle of integration has been tried. Veterinarians, citing relationships between human and animal needs and the fact that women are most likely to be the first to notice when an animal falls ill, have embarked on the creation of an animal-oriented series of visual aids.

This type of imaginative use of available information should serve as a model for all sectors. A lot of experience and information have been gathered during these past 13 years, but they are not being effectively used. The goal should be to devise ways in which as much information as possible can be distributed as widely as possible among those who will benefit most.

Women are not sufficiently involved in the production of teaching aids. There are artists among the Afghan women in Pakistan. There are others with radio and television experience. Existing audio and visual materials provide excellent models and rich information should be taken out of the files and used. The education and health sectors could also combine by producing simple, small booklets based on the radio health programmes which are so popular. This would serve to alleviate the problem of providing useful reading materials to the newly literate and to girls taken from schools at puberty, so that their new skill is not lost. Again, female artists, writers and professionals could be brought together with rewarding results.

The selection of appropriate messages is a matter which must involve the intended beneficiaries. Not all changes that programmers would have women make, fall into the cultural perspectives of usefulness conceived by the women themselves. Perhaps it seems tiresome to belabour the need for community consultation, but too often projects mainly reflect the aims of donors. The Afghan rhetoric on cultural imperialism sounds harsh, but one cannot deny that donors do have their biases.

This basic, universally acknowledged but frequently ignored principle of eliciting community involvement in choosing and implementing projects is complicated at present because the gap between Afghan voices in Pakistan and those inside Afghanistan is widening. This warrants closer scrutiny. Do the repeated calls for women's programmes from leaders of *mujahideen*-held areas inside Afghanistan indicate a different attitude to women's roles than that held by the leadership in Pakistan? Almost certainly women living in Kabul and towns still under its control will demand more varied opportunities. Documents produced by the Kabul government are so full of rhetoric and exaggerated statistics that is has been hard to gauge reality, but there is some hope that the

situation may now become somewhat clearer: throughout 1991 there has been a move, led primarily by the UN system, toward basing aid programmes in Kabul.

Programme planners must be prepared to consider projects with less restrictions but should, at the same time, keep in mind one cultural dimension which is largely underemphasised. There is a tendency in Pakistan to identify conservative Islam as the sole source of constraints on women. The religious leadership in power certainly encourages this belief. The truth is, however, that patriarchal norms outside, and sometimes even inimical to, Islam also inhibit women. In fact, it might be said that in pre-war Afghanistan strict patriarchal controls were at least as powerful as Islam itself in many families – from all segments of the society, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. These patriarchal influences on conjugal power structures, irrespective of religious injunctions, are bound to influence any future leadership.

Finally, one comes to the current crisis of declining aid. In fact, it is not at all clear whether funds are actually declining or merely being redistributed. Certainly there are marked preferences for cross-border (from Pakistan) and cross-line (from Kabul) projects and many agencies earnestly want to initiate programmes inside the country. There are already a few male-coordinated schools and income-generating projects for women, and there is even a poultry scheme for women. As already mentioned, local councils are seeking support and there are functioning Afghan women's organisations and female professionals working within many of the *mujahideen*-held areas.

This orientation toward projects inside Afghanistan makes life difficult for women trying to run projects in Pakistan. Arguing that Pakistan-based services impede repatriation, agencies are cutting funds and are reluctant to consider expanding programmes. Almost none will consider initiating new projects. For others, lack of money is a simple matter of fact. Even projects for very vulnerable women face a total withdrawal of funding from 1992.

In the light of these realities it will be necessary for women to make serious adjustments, for the moment of truth is fast approaching for many of them. Much depends on finding a political solution which will allow repatriation. In essence, the suggestions put forward throughout this discussion recommend that, until that time, all possible efforts at assistance be continued so that when they do return, women will be prepared to participate fully. Their input into rebuilding Afghanistan will undoubtedly be significant for the growth of national prosperity, for the contribution which women can make is a proven fact.

About the series

Studies and Evaluation Papers is a series of background documents drawn from field experience to present relevant findings and reflections on 'work in progress'. The series therefore acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

As such, the findings, interpretations, conclusions and views expressed are exclusively those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Some of the contributions arise directly out of field work, evaluations and training experiences from the worldwide programme supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Others are contributions which have a particular relevance to that programme. All are aimed at addressing issues relating to the field of early childhood care and development.

Contributions to this series are welcomed. Suggestions should in the first instance be addressed to: Willem van der Eyken, Head, Studies and Evaluation, Bernard van Leer Foundation, at the address given below.

About the Foundation

The **Bernard van Leer Foundation** is an international, philanthropic and professional institution based in The Netherlands. Created in 1949 for broad humanitarian purposes, the Foundation concentrates its resources on support for the development of community-led and culturally appropriate initiatives that focus on the developmental needs of children from birth to eight years of age. Currently, the Foundation supports some 100 major projects in more than 40 developing and industrialised countries.

As part of its mandate, the Foundation also supports evaluation, training and the dissemination of project experiences to an international audience. It communicates the outcomes of these activities to international agencies, institutions and governments, with the aim of improving practice and influencing policies to benefit children.

The Foundation's income is derived from the Van Leer Group of Companies - established by Bernard van Leer in 1919 - a worldwide industrial enterprise of which the Foundation is the principal beneficiary. In accordance with its Statutes, the Foundation gives preference in its project support to activities in countries which have an industrial involvement with the manufacturing companies.

Bernard van Leer Foundation, PO Box 82334, 2508 EH The Hague, The Netherlands
Tel: (070) 351 2040; Telex: 33678 bvlfh nl; Fax: (070) 350 2373

THE ROLE OF REFUGEE WOMEN AND CHILDREN OF AFGHANISTAN TODAY

Afghanistan stands poised on the threshold of peace, ready to begin rebuilding after 13 years of war. The challenges are monumental. Reconstruction of the extensive physical damage requires determined efforts, but these are relatively manageable; the reconstruction of the political structure is more problematic, but solutions are being worked out by national and international bodies; the rebonding of social institutions, however, remains fraught with deep emotional contentions, many of which revolve around women and their role in society. None dispute the centrality of women: the arguments are over how women may best prepare for their responsibilities. That women and children constitute the core of the family, the single most important Afghan social institution, also remains unquestioned, as does women's role in perpetuating the ideals of the society. They symbolise family and community honour. Women, along with their children, are thereby inextricably enmeshed in current political contests for ideological primacy.

Displacement and exile in themselves have not only tightened family bonds, they have initiated intense appraisals of the actions which must be taken in order to preserve the integrity of women within this important institution. As a result, ultra-conservative elements seeking to deny women a dignity of place – a principle which was once a hallmark of the society – have risen to the surface as a dominant force.

Productive female roles in reconstruction are therefore in danger of being summarily rejected or reduced to superficialities. The inclusion of informed women in decision-making forums could guard against these dangers, but today their voices are muted. It is the purpose of this paper to focus on some possible options based on a continuity of the evolution of women's roles.

Origin and status of the present conflict

On 27 April 1978, a group of left-oriented urban intellectuals in Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, staged a coup that brought into being the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Although the new leadership insisted that it had risen from the 'masses', its heavy-handed attempts to impose reforms on a predominantly rural population that had traditionally resisted interference from central governments met with early dissent. Agrarian reforms threatened the existing socio-economic framework without providing any viable alternatives. Social reforms looked set to erode cherished cultural values, and the passage of power into the hands of detribalised outsiders was viewed as an intolerable intrusion into the closely knit, kinship-based rural society.

As the rumblings of discontent flared into open conflict, the Kabul government reacted with harsh, repressive measures, alienating virtually every segment of society. Religious, political and intellectual elites were jailed or executed; ground attacks and aerial bombings destroyed villages and killed countless numbers of the rural population. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people disappeared or were executed in Afghan jails in the period of less than two years from April 1978 to December 1979. By the end of 1979, about 1,000

refugees were crossing into Pakistan every day.

The chaos created by the DRA's tactics prompted the Soviet Union to invade on Christmas Eve 1979. The systematic Soviet ground and air offensives which followed, carried further the deliberate large-scale devastation of the agricultural infrastructure; it decimated livestock, and depopulated rural areas. In addition, military operations launched by the *mujahideen* (resistance fighters), cut off large areas from supplies, leaving the people to either starve or flee. The resulting increase in the refugee flow reached a peak between January and June 1981, when an estimated 4,700 crossed the Pakistan border daily. There were mass exoduses of several hundred tribal-related extended lineages, while others arrived in small groups of kin-related families.

The flow of refugees ebbed and surged in response to Soviet offensives and the consequent decline of the rural areas. By the end of 1988, with 115,000 Soviet troops continuing to occupy Afghanistan (a country no larger than France), more than a third of its pre-coup population of approximately 15 million were living outside its borders: about 3.5 million in Pakistan; about 2 million in Iran; and a number of resettled residents in other parts of the world. Another million were displaced within Afghanistan. Reflecting the country's pre-war demography, 90 per cent of the refugees in Pakistan and Iran came from rural areas; those resettled in Western countries are largely educated urban elites.

Meanwhile, the *mujahideen,* operating mainly from Pakistan, gained control of about 85 per cent of the countryside, confining the Soviets and the Kabul administration to the capital and major provincial towns. Finding the situation intolerable, the Soviets withdrew their military forces in February 1989.

It was generally predicted that after the Soviet withdrawal, the Kabul government would quickly fall. That did not happen. The Afghan political leaders in Pakistan and Iran, meanwhile, have been unable to provide cohesive alternative solutions. The Afghan Interim Government in Pakistan is bankrupt and commands scant respect while members of the political leadership stand censured for self-serving incompetence.

Profound disenchantment therefore dulls the hopes which have glimmered among exiled Afghans since the Soviets withdrew. In fact, new refugees continue to arrive, offsetting the trickle of Afghans (some 140,000) who have responded to official repatriation efforts. Some spontaneous returns take place, but these are largely seasonal in nature. Within the total of 3.5 million refugees, the number who had cut their ties with Pakistan by mid-1991 was insignificant.

There are a number of reasons for this reluctance to repatriate. The refugees themselves cite as paramount the almost total absence of security in their areas of origin. The lack of guaranteed economic activities is another deterrent. Assistance efforts supported by international organisations inside Afghanistan are scattered. In many cases projects are inadequate; even those presently functioning successfully would be overwhelmed should a large-scale repatriation suddenly materialise.

Women express their own particular anxieties. They speak with despair of undergoing the trauma of displacement again, and are cynical about the ability of the Afghan leadership to provide even minimal services. Although women have been physically restricted while living in Pakistan, their experiences as refugees have heightened their expectations. They have learned to value much of what was once taken for granted, they have learned to want more for themselves and their children, and they have learned to consider options, but they see few chances of realising their new-found aspirations under circumstances prevailing inside Afghanistan.

So the refugees wait.

Life for women refugees

The 321 designated settlement areas for Afghan refugees in Pakistan are strung out on a 240 kilometre arc along the border with Afghanistan. This is an area of dusty, treeless plains, barren mountains and deserts: a fragile ecology. Climatic extremes see temperatures plummet to below zero degrees fahrenheit in the winter, only to rise above 100 degrees in summer. Water and fuel resources are not only scarce, but are fiercely defended by local residents. Thus the women, primary gatherers of these necessities, must often move in hostile environments.

The original tented refugee housing gradually gave way to mud constructions resembling larger villages in Afghanistan. This was undoubtedly an improvement in terms of comfort, but the overcrowded, closely built dwellings afford no private space, inside or out, for women who were accustomed to work and relax in large courtyards or secluded walled orchards. For many, this lack of private space produces acute psychological distress far outweighing physical discomforts.

The outward semblance of solidity masks an existence that continues to be tenuous and disrupted. Life is in many ways artificial, although the struggle for survival is very real. There are plenty of routine chores to be done but the daily life of a refugee is devoid of the meaningful activities that once contributed to a woman's sense of accomplishment and well-being. There are no crops to harvest for the women to process, no sheep to sheer for wool which the women will spin and weave, no orchard fruits to pick for women to prepare and preserve. Mutual respect arose from the acknowledged close interconnection of male and female roles in performing these activities in the rural areas. Traditional female roles, therefore, have been gravely marginalised in the refugee villages. Still, both urban and rural women have gained strength and self-assurance in new ways. The uncertainties of male support due to their absence at distant workplaces or on the war front, where casualties are high, have caused women to assume more responsibilities, including the task of raising children without paternal support. Though finding this stressful, most women have met the challenge with admirable success.

The reputation of Afghan women as a group is held in high esteem among both Afghans and Pakistanis. To maintain this reputation, women are generally more constrained in their movements and inhibited in their activities than they were in Afghanistan. In the crowded refugee settlements, the mix of ethnic, geographic and social backgrounds is intimidating. In the cities, Afghan families are equally crowded together with foreigners. Indeed, in many cases the attitudes of their Pakistani neighbours are far stricter than their own. In both these patriarchal societies, the world beyond the immediate vicinities of the home has always been regarded as hostile territory where women become intolerably vulnerable. Settlement patterns, therefore, strengthen the social and religious conservatism that permeates all facets of refugee life.

Women and Islam

Islam is recognised and universally accepted as the foundation of the Afghan way of life. Formerly, no central religious authority was given exclusive rights to interpret, much less enforce, individual attitudes regarding religious practices. Public rhetoric was therefore superfluous. In the past, Afghans with different interpretations of the *Shari'at* (Islamic Law) co-existed quite contentedly; the war, however, has brought to the forefront groups of self-appointed religious

spokesmen claiming the right to act as moral arbiters, to decide who is a 'good Muslim', who may be judged a 'good Muslim woman'. As a result, traditional Afghan tolerance is being sorely strained and the long-term effects of its deterioration may well prove more difficult to amend than the physical destruction to which so much attention has been paid.

Those who argue that the principle of equality is central to Islamic tenets, requiring believers to accord dignity to all regardless of age, sex, occupation or status, are now in conflict with conservatives who hold that if women are permitted to move freely in the public arena sexual anarchy will result and society will fall into ruin. Although variations on this debate have divided reformists and conservatives in Afghanistan since the beginning of the twentieth century, the present turmoil brought about by a war against both physical and ideological intrusions has strengthened the religious conservatives in their political manipulation of Islam. More particularly, their would-be constraints on women are often motivated more by political strategy than religious conviction: the resulting politicisation of women's issues becomes highly sensitive and potentially volatile because of the centrality of women in the social concepts of family and honour. In order to keep the family, the primary social institution, running smoothly, the corruption of women, symbols of honour, must be prevented at all costs.

The question of how family rectitude is to be maintained is addressed in the utterances and actions of various grades of religious spokesmen scattered throughout the refugee communities, many of whom are barely literate. Some are genuine in their convictions, but others merely follow the dictates of party leaders and foreign missionaries (mostly Arab) with bountiful largess at their disposal. In addition, there are among the *mujahideen* large numbers of Islamic-minded educated youth, imbued by the war with a fanatic sense of duty to defend and preserve their cultural identity. These men are obsessed with an aggressive need to protect women's morality.

To maintain the purity of women, the religious conservatives insist on their own strict interpretations and applications of the *Shari'at*. Separate spaces for men and women to preserve modesty and decency are essential. Interactions between the sexes outside the *mahrammat* (the group of acceptable male guardians including father, brother, son or any other male with whom a woman may not marry) are strictly forbidden. These restrictions severely limit women's activities, including access to education and extra-domestic training.

While conceding that men and women have equal rights to seek religious knowledge, the need for women's education is said to lie solely in receiving the instruction necessary for the proper performance of religious duties. The thought of preparing for work outside the home is inconceivable. Maintaining that secular girls' schools, even when separate and taught by female teachers, are seats of moral corruption, the religious conservatives declare that girls who attend such institutions, together with their male guardians, are guilty of sin.

Together, these conservative notions culminate in an emotional stance on the matter of appropriate dress, particularly the obligatory wearing of veils. This has had the greatest visible impact on educated urban Afghan women in Pakistan who have, by necessity, set aside the Western styles which before 1978 had symbolised modernity and emancipation.

Many critics among the Afghans regard this development with horror, believing that it will inevitably lead to legitimising and institutionalising inequality by fostering feelings of subservience and coercion. Certainly the frantic positioning of face-veils at the unexpected appearance of unrelated males is not a gesture associated with self-assurance or confidence. Because there are men in the

refugee community who would willingly spread slanderous rumours about women who failed to act in this way, the adoption of this behaviour can be understood in the current context. Whispering campaigns have utterly destroyed a girl's status in the community, and with it her family's honour. How long the need for such furtiveness will continue after repatriation is hard to tell. How it will affect the psychology of the very young is also difficult to predict, but the possible development of long-term behavioural inhibitions is worrying large segments of the educated refugee community. Such controversies will no doubt continue, especially after repatriation brings together the women now in exile with those living in Kabul, where fewer constraints allow women to make their own statement of alliance by continuing to wear Western styles. The political symbolism of dress cannot be underrated.

Periodically, women who challenge the conservatives are subjected to more violent eruptions. Clandestinely distributed notices tout the allegation that women's programmes are a mask for the introduction of permissive practices inimical to Islamic mores. Afghan women working with agencies funded by foreign money are served with warnings to quit or suffer dire consequences; female facilities entirely managed by Afghan women share the abuse. A woman's place is in the home, it is claimed; there is no need for education or training beyond the family environment. The Afghan Interim Government in Pakistan is at times called upon to enforce the closing of all female institutions so as to 'save ourselves from punishment by Allah'.

These outbursts are denounced by the majority of educated Afghans as further examples of ignorant *mullahism.* However, the moderates have yet to establish effective communication channels to the conservative decision-makers whose *jihad* (holy war) mentality is so extreme. For the present, the moderates allow the conservatives to speak for them, fearing that to do otherwise will compromise the reputations of both sexes. The few who have spoken out most strongly have been assassinated.

It is important to bear in mind that opposition to women's programmes does exist, and to understand its nature. Though spasmodic and discredited by a large proportion of the society, violence is no less lethal for being random. Because deeply-rooted opposition by religious conservatives results in verbal and physical abuse, the anti-feminist campaigns can, and do, impede programmes; they most certainly will continue to present disruptive challenges in the future.

Afghan women acknowledge that many obstacles lie in the way of their aspirations. Nevertheless, they are firm in their conviction that they can successfully contend with the situation by being true to their society's values, which they do not wish to deny, and that they can, even should, play an active part in the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan.

How well have they succeeded?

Women's involvement: current problems and some possible solutions

Women in health

The establishment of health services to ward off epidemics was an initial priority which recognised the unique position of women and children. However, finding adequately trained female health professionals willing to work under difficult conditions in remote areas where a preponderance of vulnerable groups lived quickly became a major problem. The skeleton female medical staff was, and

has remained, primarily Pakistani, simply because there are so few qualified Afghan women willing to work in these situations.

Yet the crush of refugees – predominantly rural women and children – at the Basic Health Units created scenes of utter bedlam. Women and children make up 76 per cent of the registered refugee population and a good 48 per cent of the children are under the age of 12. Although data collection is admittedly weak, there is no doubt that the infant and child mortality rates, which average 185 and 329 per 1,000 live births respectively, are strikingly high. Sadly, these figures reflect the situation in pre-war Afghanistan, where children under the age of five accounted for over 50 per cent of all deaths.

Between a quarter and a third of the deaths of women in their reproductive years, between 15 and 45, are attributable to causes related to childbearing, of which an estimated 80 to 85 per cent could be avoided by preventive measures or the provision of proper health care. The current refugee population has the highest Afghan fertility rate ever recorded at 13.6 live births per 1,000, compared to 9.3 prior to 1978. Over one half the refugee women have had six or more pregnancies; some have had as many as 12; one-third have experienced miscarriages and one half have lost at least one child.

Predominant causes of mortality for all ages, but particularly among children under five, include acute respiratory infections, water-borne infections such as diarrhoea and dysentery, and other gastro-intestinal problems. Poor nutrition is commonly caused by improper feeding and weaning practices. Malaria, skin and eye diseases and birthing complications due to inadequate techniques and lack of ante-natal and post-natal care are also prevalent. A shift from curative services to home-managed preventative health activities was therefore undertaken.

The challenges were daunting, yet there was one positive ingredient. The crowds thronging the health units represented an unprecedented gathering of women, a concentrated audience never attainable in Afghanistan, where small remote villages located far from any traffic routes were often many days' walk from centres supplying even rudimentary health services.

Tens of thousands of women have now heard the health improvement messages put forward by medical teams working with numerous assistance agencies. Indications are that many of the refugees now appreciate the benefits of ante-natal care, immunisation, the early introduction of infants to health care, oral rehydration therapy (ORT) and even, in some cases, better weaning practices. As successful as these have been, it must be noted that by 1991, over a decade after the exodus began, up to 50 per cent of the refugee women are still underserved or unserved. It is likely that more than 85 per cent of the women living in the refugee villages continue traditional birthing practices at home without the benefit of trained assistance.

Permanent changes can only evolve when every member of the family is involved. While tending to target women of child-bearing ages, programme workers miss the potentially important group of pre-teen children who are normally entrusted with much of the daily care of their younger siblings. This could be particularly relevant for girls, since few attend school and, in any case, curricula rarely include health or hygiene as a regular subject. In addition, older post-menopausal aunts and grandmothers, who are respected influences in the family household, need to be approached, for they are allowed greater mobility within the public spaces traditionally reserved for men.

Considering the patriarchal nature of the society, eliciting the participation of men in health education has proved crucial to the success of women's

programmes. Only when men are as aware as women of the benefits of each major issue, and realise that individual health depends on cooperative family action, can positive results be assured. The most important requirement, therefore, is to promote community level dialogues tailored to realities which will contribute to community motivation and lead ultimately to the assumption of community commitment and responsibility.

Methodology varies among organisations, but a general pattern utilises groups of female 'master trainers' from outside the community; they instruct local women motivators, who are then placed in charge of a particular group of the community's female population. The motivators may operate home visiting schedules or conduct daily gatherings in their homes. However organised, two essential elements enhance positive responses: motivators are selected with the agreement of male leaders within the community and are therefore able to attract the maximum number of participants; and they are made responsible for a limited number of people, generally around 30 households with a total population of approximately 180 individuals, typically related either by kinship or place of origin.

For teaching methods, some organisations rely exclusively on such non-formal aids as posters and flip-charts while others have developed audio cassettes to assist motivators with limited teaching skills in their use of the visual materials. There is much scope for development in the design and production of teaching aids. Although there is plenty of technical information available, imaginative techniques need to be devised to use this material effectively.

When it comes to repatriation, a returning population more aware that health care can alleviate suffering and diminish mortality will find a health network which was never adequate even more drastically disintegrated. Will women health professionals and providers be there to help in the rebuilding processes?

During the early days of the exodus, both the attitudes of the Government of Pakistan towards refugee employment, and the initial stunned reaction of Afghans facing forced adjustments in their lifestyles, discouraged educated women from coming forward. As a result, the majority of professional women left for Western countries. Their much-needed talents were lost, at least for the duration of their exile. If predictions hold, few if any will return.

This decimated the female health resource base and it was necessary to make a totally new beginning.

When hostility towards education for women began to lessen, growing numbers of young women flocked to newly-established medical training courses. Upwards of a thousand women have participated in a variety of formal health courses ranging in duration from a few months to one year or more. These learning opportunities in most cases emphasise mother-child care and general health care delivery. In many instances instruction is regrettably superficial, a drawback compounded by a tendency among the participants to be lax in their studies. To many, the classes mainly offer an accepted social release from home confinement, and they show no particular interest in continuing to work after completing their studies. As yet there is no adequate way of evaluating the effectiveness of the training although, on the whole, it is reputed to be below acceptable standards.

Inside Afghanistan, the number of female doctors working in the rural areas can be counted on one hand. While recognising a desperate need for female health workers, including essential vaccination teams, health programme implementors candidly admit they have found no recruitment solutions because women

unaccompanied by family members are unable to travel or work inside Afghanistan.

The challenge for the future, when families return, is to motivate and direct more quality training toward women at all levels. In approaching this challenge, Afghanistan's unique regional geographic and ethnic diversities demand that training programmes recognise a variety of designs specific to conditions in each area. Allied to this is the need to devise different training components accommodating several levels of workers, as well as designs for community and district development with, of course, linkages to provincial and national networks which may be some time in materialising. This being the case, administration and the management/supervision of personnel and information become crucial elements for an overall programme.

Most basic, perhaps, is the need to tailor strategies to realities, building affordable infrastructures with available resources so as to allow communities to develop according to their own capacities. Introducing international models beyond the range of knowledge of both workers and beneficiaries is a self-defeating exercise with potential for real disaster.

To sum up the position of women in health, there is a clear need for quality training, both in management and supervision and in technical health skills. But it will be the elements of incentives and motivation which will determine whether or not a network of basic health workers functioning as agents of change can be adequately developed.

Women in education

Education was hardly uppermost in the minds of refugees arriving in Pakistan during the initial days of the exodus: the basics of survival were their concern. Even so, the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR administrators established primary schools for boys in the refugee encampments as early as 1979. The mere mention of education for girls at this early date was anathema. Even to suggest it was to invite denouncement as an undercover communist, a traitor to Afghanistan, an enemy of Islam.

This represented a reversal of steady gains in Afghan women's education since the first girls' school opened in Kabul in 192[illegible]. Through the years, the concept of female education was promoted primarily by male-dominated governments for a number of stated reasons, including the enhancement of national prosperity through a 50 per cent increase in the workforce, although its role in developing female self-esteem was scarcely articulated.

The situation for the refugees within Pakistan, however, has improved markedly over the years as the success of the *jihad* has given Afghans confidence in their ability to defend their ideals. An estimated 30 per cent of the refugees have undergone some type of schooling and/or training. According to a 1986 survey, 41 per cent of the children in a sample of refugee villages were between the ages of 5 and 17; that is, children of school age. Of those aged 5 to 11, 50.6 per cent of the boys and 4 per cent of the girls claimed to be at school or undertaking some type of education. The gap widens significantly among 12 to 17 year olds where the percentage of boys rises to 52.8 per cent while that of girls drops to a pitiful 1.4 per cent. Puberty marks the end of schooling for most girls.

This sampled population was largely from rural areas where the pre-war situation was, if anything, even less encouraging. Only 11.4 per cent of Afghanistan's total pre-1978 population was literate; of those, only 15.7 per cent were rural men and an insignificant 0.6 per cent women. Even this low rate

among women dropped to 0.1 per cent or less in some areas including Paktya and Zabul, two provinces well-represented among the refugees. Education was therefore both gender and ethno-geographically differentiated, with rural women having the least opportunities of all.

Of greater importance perhaps are deeper, more fundamental attitudinal constraints. Although Islam advocates universal education and accords teachers high respect, rural Afghans basically view formal education with profound indifference. It was this indifference, more than acknowledged monetary and physical limitations, that largely accounted for the nation's inability to build a good educational system in the past, despite the determined efforts of many sincere advocates.

The root cause of this indifference is not difficult to detect. It lies very simply in the fact that the system was inappropriate for the rural areas; it provided little of benefit to compensate for time spent in school. For village children, the meaningful learning experiences took place in the fields, where sons learned from their fathers, and in the home, where girls learned from their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. This instruction was easily absorbed and retained. It should in no way be undervalued. Those who learned to read at school, on the other hand, lost their skills and incentives rapidly, since there was nothing to read for whatever purpose, appropriate or otherwise, once the child left the schoolhouse. Furthermore, according to conventional beliefs, the knowledge a girl needs in order to fulfil her primary roles as wife and mother is found at home, not in secular schools where she may learn to question the primacy of male authority.

Heartening requests for educational assistance from local councils ruling today in the *mujahideen*-held areas inside Afghanistan point, perhaps, to the widened horizons emerging among refugee populations. Pakistan-based international agencies have responded to these calls, but unless trained teachers and appropriate materials can be provided, the old indifference will probably prevail once again.

The long period when female education was so vehemently opposed among refugees in Pakistan has taken its toll on the diverse educational institutions which now offer opportunities from primary through to university levels. Some are officially supported by the Pakistani Government/UNHCR, others are affiliated with political parties, often funded by European, US, Arab or Pakistani voluntary agencies. There are a few private schools run by Afghans in the cities, and some urban families send their children to Pakistani schools. Consequently there is much confusion and controversy, but no consistency or standardisation.

Arguments over curricula are particularly sensitive. Religion forms a major part of the curriculum in each school. Of the total teaching time, an average of 44 per cent, rising to 52 per cent in some schools, is devoted to Islamic studies during the first three years. This decreases slightly during the final three years to accommodate classes in history, geography, science, and a little health instruction. Maths and language skills are stressed, but instruction in reading and writing is weak. A serious lack of language skills is disturbingly evident among those who pursue higher studies. Even holders of engineering and medical degrees are at times incapable of writing simple intelligible sentences in their mother tongue. Afghan refugee children are growing up without the basic tool of language: they are thus being deprived of their rich literary heritage. This should be of grave concern to all those interested in Afghanistan's cultural future.

Many of these problems stem from the poorly designed textbooks which neither pupils nor teachers understand. Ideologically oriented toward the *jihad*, the contents are dense and abstract, with little relevance to the lives of the students

Bernard van Leer Foundation

Studies and Evaluation Papers
7

The present role of Afghan refugee women and children

Nancy H. Dupree

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
(ACBAR)
Peshawar, Pakistan

The Hague, The Netherlands

Bernard van Leer Foundation

The present role of Afghan refugee women and children

Nancy H. Dupree

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
(ACBAR)
Peshawar, Pakistan

The Hague, The Netherlands
July 1992